

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019

www.ijellh.com

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The Dialectics of Female Sexuality in the Indian Society

What is sexuality?

It is the state of being sexual with certain or no preferences. Now some people like attaching labels with it and some don't. This is really out of the trajectory of the discussion of this paper. What this paper really intends to do is to analyze and understand the mentality behind the issue of female sexuality in Indian literature, in particular.

We are aware that sexuality in general, is a tabooed subject especially if it's centered on the issue of females. Hence, this paper aims to probe into the condition of women portrayed in Indian literature which is a general tell-all for the whole Indian society since literature acts as a mirror for the mentality of its parent society. The attitude towards female sexuality here is almost discriminatory to the point that the society is pregnant with hostile and unacceptable beliefs which is not only unfair but also stunts a woman's growth as a free being, a sexually active being.

Female sexuality is still very much a nascent arena of discussion in Indian literature as compared to the Western literature. Here, people still feel awkward discussing the general scenario publicly and openly. There sure have been books and works featuring strong female leads but the critical aspect or understanding as to why female sexuality is so restrained and confined still remains pretty much unexplored. What you can expect from this short discussion to follow is a critical analyzation of various sexual taboos associated with women and why they are how they have been all these years.

This paper will try to achieve this by critically examining the portrayal of female sexuality in Indian canvas so far and the various aspects, stereotypes, taboos, etcetera tied along with it. In doing so, this paper shall delve into examples from the works of celebrated and distinguished Indian writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Mahasweta Devi, Rabindranath Tagore, Ismat Chughtai and even Mirza Hadi Ruswa.

The Female Libido

Female libido is not an openly talked about aspect of a woman's sexuality particularly in India. In other words, it is considered a taboo to be able to even discuss it openly. Now, one might say the scenario is slowly changing with so many books and movies featuring lesbian relationships, unfulfilled passions, etc. but back in the day when the frame of Indian writings was relatively 'shy' and 'naive' to be able to write about it, writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai and even Rabindranath Tagore to an extent tried to lend a voice to the otherwise silent and unventured arena.

None depicts or raises the question of the female sexual libido so unapologetically to the point of almost glorifying it as Saadat Hasan Manto in his stories like *Thanda Gosht*. Manto's depiction of female libido via his heroine, Kalwant Kaur is simply crude, raw and organic. He instills in his female protagonist the assertiveness and the impenitent need or desire for sexual gratification, especially since her husband Ishwar Singh comes back after a couple of days of absence. And when he is unable to satisfy her, she quickly turns bitter and starts to question his loyalty. Manto depicts her as "a buxom woman: thick arms and heavy legs with large fleshly buttocks..." who has a "luscious body, so full of life and passions" and has been 'waiting' for her husband but gets disappointed on not being given what is rightfully hers, i.e., sexual satisfaction as a married woman. Another interesting fact about this couple is that the wife is always referred to as a "pot boiling over a bonfire", "wild cat", "taut wire", etc. whereas the husband is "cold, cold like ice", "defeated wrestler" with "dry lips" and "cold sweat", etc. Hence, one cannot help but notice how subtly Manto

categorises the two, their temperament and most importantly, their sexuality with such descriptive words.

One might question Manto's portrayal as obscene as the commonly held notion is today, or simply understand and accept it as an expression of thought. Yes, we do get to see explicit graphic description of lust, body and flesh but there is a different aspect to it. In order to understand the sexual libido, it is extremely important to represent the female sexuality true to its nature of things. The demands of the body need not be confused with the demands of the societal norms, here.

Moving on, Ismat Chughtai too is seen as a pioneer of feminism and female sexuality, in particular. And though Chughtai is not as direct and explicit as Manto, she still raises concern for unfulfilled female passions and how a woman's sexual needs were completely neglected and assumed absent. In her story *Lihaaf*, she depicts a homosexual relationship between the upper class Begum Jaan and her servant Rabboo, on being ignored by her husband Nawab Sahib. Begum Jaan ultimately finds her sexual happiness in Rabboo but one cannot help and wonder if this 'happiness' is even natural, or if it's circumstantial and a helpless solution to seek gratification. In other words, Begum Jaan has no other option but to find her physical happiness elsewhere since her own husband likes young and slender boys and has no time or desire for his wife. In doing so, Chughtai is raising an even serious aspect of female homosexual love that it might not necessarily be a question of 'desire' always, it could be a hopeless way out of the conflict of passions and body. Rabboo once tells Begum Jaan of her constant 'itch' which is a double-entendre for sexual frustration,

There is nothing wrong with you. It's just the heat of the body.

Begum Jaan here has no choice but to resort to homosexuality because like any other man, she too has her sexual wants and needs. In a way, Chughtai debunks the age-old notion that women don't have, or rather cannot have a sexual libido. It questions all the stereotypes of the society's idea of the feminine which quite conveniently brushes off the bodily needs of a woman.

Even Rabinranath Tagore's short story which is quite aptly titled, *Hungry Stones* is a story of

a Bengali Babu who shares his story with the narrator while sitting in a waiting-room of a railway junction of what he had heard and seen while he was in a medieval uninhabited castle for a few days as a tax collector of Nizam's in Hyderabad. The castle was basically a pleasure palace built by a ruler about 250 years back. The Bengali Babu would hear the footsteps of women running around and jumping into the river Shusta, musical sounds of tinkling ornaments, etc. One night, in his sleep he even seemed to feel someone push him gently. Night after night he felt this presence, "He heard the sighs of the depressed, he felt tears dropping on his brow; mourning and demented woman seemed to move in every direction", until one day his assistant told him:

In this palace are unfulfilled desires as also the flames of wild enjoyment...the curses of frustrated each stone is hungry and thirsty...

A fine tale of imagination, fantasy and mystery. The pathos of the story lies in the narration of the suppressed passions of the dead women of the palace whose stones still whisper the unfulfilled desires and emotions of the women who still haunt the place. The tone of the story very carefully captures the mood of the narration which silently questions the treatment of women when it came to their sexual needs which, for the most part remained unsatisfied.

The Politics of Space: the Public vs the Private

It isn't a hard-to-believe fact that women have always been and are still relegated to marginal spaces or spaces on the periphery of any institution. They have never been a center of any important social or familial activity apart from producing babies. In other words, this type of treatment meted out to them can be traced in the way the physical spaces have been attributed to men and women separately of any institution, starting from the household. This underlying pattern of women being associated to only the peripheral spaces is an evidence of their status being equivalent to the otherwise marginal people of the society, and so whatever little space for expression they have remains in 'the private' part of the household or inside the household which is forever in conflict

with 'the public' which is symbolised and inhabited by the men. There is always a certain kind of politics that surrounds the polarisation of this space. In accordance with this, the sexual activities or rather the sexual freedom means different to both.

In Chughtai's *Lihaaf*, the narrator is sent to Begum Jaan's house to correct her tomboyish ways, ways that society doesn't approve of since the narrator is a young muslim girl. But ironically enough, this 'zenana' which is an all-woman core of heteropatriarchal household has become the centre of homoerotic activities which is unapproved by the society in public. What is interesting to notice is that all these lesbian activities between Begum Jaan and Rabboo are not out in the public and though the maids do speculate but it is all a part of the 'private' while on the other hand, Nawab Sahib's homosexual activities with young slender-waisted boys is a 'public' knowledge and he does so quite unapologetically. Therefore, the sexual freedom for a man is just not confined to 'the private', whereas for a woman it is specifically limited to a private physical space. This reappropriation of a physical space and its altered significance, henceforth affirms the obliterated female desire or her sexual freedom in a man's world.

In Manto's *Thanda Gosht* too, one can draw such a reference. The story is set in the era of the Indian partition where women were seen as mere vessels bearing the stamp of their community, hence to defile them was to defile their respective communities. And therefore Ishwer Singh's raping muslim women in the name of communal revenge was considered fair and just. Society gave Ishwer Singh and men like him the right to merge the sexual self with the public self in the name of public service or good but his wife on the other hand, is given no such leniencies. She can function as a sexual being only inside her household space and with her husband. Therefore, her sexual freedom is confined to her private space but Ishwar Singh is free to take his pursuits outside of this 'private space' into 'the public.'

The Cult of Motherhood

Motherhood is a celebrated aspect of a woman's sexuality in every culture. It is so because it is fruitful for the society and has a socially sanctioned purpose, i-e, to produce children and carry the family progeny ahead. There is no room for pleasure or desire for a woman in her 'divine' role as a mother. It's not the same for men for we have seen men build pleasure palaces and harems for their sexual pursuits which are completely devoid of any social purpose or whatever. What is funny is that society seems to be totally okay with a man being an individual with needs of a sexually active being which might or might not have a socially sanctioned purpose. The pleasure seeking reason seems to be just good enough. But the moment you see a woman trying to venture out and explore the realms of the sexual world, the whole debate about moral responsibility and promiscuity comes into being. She is immediately termed as a 'fallen woman.'

Tagore's story *A Wife's Letter* lends its female protagonist a voice powerful enough that it at once challenges the trends set by the society when it comes to being a woman and a mother. Mrinal, the protagonist writes a long letter to her husband from Puri when on a pilgrimage regarding her bitter and eye-opening experiences resulting out of oppression and subordination in a male-dominated society, wherein she is expected to surrender her opinions, desires, etc. and makes a remark on the celebrated cult of motherhood:

I suffered only the pain of motherhood; I never experienced its freedom.

This pilgrimage is symbolic in a sense that one journeys to a holy place such as Puri to engage with the holy and the divine, and to experience God's grace. Mrinal quite literally comes into contact with her inner enlightened self and experiences the divine because it is here that she has an epiphany about the bitter truth of female existence and decides to break off these ties to only nurture what is true and is untainted by the unholy.

Motherhood is considered as the most essential requirement of womanhood, as discussed earlier, since it's a productively yielding aspect of her sexual identity. She is only seen as a child-bearing machine and certainly not as someone with her own set of desires and need for sexual

fulfillment. Her sexual want is directed at only being a mother, a vessel carrying children for men. This takes away a certain sense of agency from her and limits her freedom, in every sense of the word. She is merely a sexual puppet which only moves when it's made to.

The Edible Woman

Margaret Atwood wrote her famous dystopian work, the *Handmaid's Tale* in 1985 which is set in future New England under a totalitarian military regime. This regime treats women as merely reproductive beings, wherein each handmaid is assigned to an officer and is expected to bear him children in spite of the officers already having wives. These handmaids are seen as objects with an 'edibility factor' attached which can be exploited and used for male consumption without any repercussions. This entails a larger debate about female sexuality put up on sale and the scope for capitalistic consumption arising out of it. Hence, female sexuality is seen as something ripe and edible enough for male consumption in their own right. Now this happens via various different ways, for example prostitution, rape, fetishistic descriptions of female bodies in adult comics, etc. And all these issues are in abundance in Indian narratives starting from Manto's *Khol Do*, Hatak, etc. to Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*. All these works have one thing in common when it comes to female sexuality, i-e, the edibility factor associated with them in different ways which we are about to discuss.

Time has been a witness to women being the bearers of the weight of war and resistance. Wherever there is conflict, there is rape and abuse of women. Rape is seen as an act that strips women off their honour and status. In stories like Manto's *Khol Do* and Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, rape is a dominant and challenging theme. In the former story, Sakina, a young Muslim girl is raped by men of her own community who quite ironically were pleaded by the girl's father to bring her back safely amidst the chaos of the ongoing partition turmoil. And in the latter, the female protagonist *Dopadi*, a tribal woman is raped by the policemen who in social and legal terminology

stand for civil protection and upholding of law. While both the stories have rape as a prominent theme but the reactions of the women to rape are rather oppositional in nature.

Khol Do is a story of a young girl, Sakina's rape by the male volunteers of her own community (unlike the communal rape theme in Manto's Thanda Gosht) who apparently volunteered to 'help' people of their own community in the tumultuous times. When, in the end of the story after Sakina's been found, the doctor asks her father Sirajuddin to open the window of the hospital room for the light to come in, Sakina starts to disrobe herself in a strikingly traumatic manner shedding light on her battered fate at the hands of these male volunteers. The robotic manner in which she opens her 'salwar' taking the doctor's 'khol do' as a command for female submission is very unsettling and cathartic as a reader. In doing so, Manto has tried to portray the painful aspect of being a woman in a man's world which stands in complete contrast and opposition to the value of 'consent' in an act of intercourse. The fact that Sakina's body was seen as an object of consumption implying female submission and subjugation is a point worth noting.

In Draupadi, Dopdi is raped and abused by the whole police station who in doing so want to teach her a lesson for her tribal resistance and rebellious activities is rather gruesome. In the end, when she decides to gather all her courage and walk tall, naked and covered with blood and injuries from the multiple rapes, she differs from Sakina. Dopdi makes her sexuality her weapon and rubs it in the face of these male oppressors who thought abusing her sexually would silence her spirit but it instead gave her the courage simultaneously making these so-called public servants seem tiny and small.

Prostitution, like rape is another such aspect of female sexuality that is put up on sale for male consumption. One might wonder that there is a degree of consent involved from the woman's end but is it actually the truth? Do women willingly put their bodies on sale with a price tag? One might care to think that often times, it is forced and thrust upon due the circumstances that they find themselves in, be it hunger or poverty. Same is the case in Manto's play Hatak.

Hatak is the story of a prostitute Sugandhi. The play extensively focuses on the body and psyche of this prostitute who emerges as an intelligent woman determined to put a full-stop to her sexual exploitation. Therefore, in a way she can be seen as more powerful and strong than the virtuous upper-class wives who have no say in their sexual lives whatsoever. This so-called “fallen-woman” (which itself forces them to put their bodies for sale since its men only that go to these brothels) according to the hollow and unfair standards of the patriarchal society trades only her body and not her soul (it is this society which forces them to put their bodies for sale since it’s only these men that go to these brothels). She is only close to her dog, for she feels it’s only him that remains loyal to her in love and affection. In the end, she compares herself to a “train filled with passengers that, after off-loading them, now stands alone in an iron shed...”, for such is the fate of these women who are traded for their bodies, seen only as consummable entities and tossed aside when the edibility factor has decreased or in other words, when all have had a fair share of them.

The Female Queer Desire

What is “queer?” In order to understand female queer desire, it is imperative that we discuss what is queer first. The dictionary meaning of the term literally translates to something differing in an odd and strange way from what is usual or normal. In other words, it stands for anti-heteronormative and anti-homonormative systems of sexual identity. And that is precisely why the word ‘queer’ or ‘queer desire’ is threatening to some people, becoming even more stigmatized and attracting a greater sense of hostility when associated with women. The fact that women can go outside the limits of gender binaries to explore and express their queer consciousness makes them by default question the already existing traditional systems of ‘value’ that govern and run the ‘public interests.’ Very few Indian writers have had the courage to explore this arena of female sexuality, Ismat Chughtai being the prominent figure.

As discussed earlier her work *Lihaaf* touches upon the subject of female libido and unfulfilled

passions making space for situational or forced lesbianism, one can't help but also notice that it in fact lends a powerful voice to the tabooed question of female queer desire. Her work has strong undertones of lesbian love-making and unrequited passions looking for unconventional sexual outlets. 'Queer' is in itself considered a pejorative word for the same-sex desires and relationships, and the portrayal of something so offensive and unacceptable to the traditional Indian audience and society, at large was a bold act on the female writer's behalf. *Lihaaf* in a way functions as the referential work for others exploring the similar aspects of female sexuality. Chughtai's representation of Begum Jaan and Rabboo's same-sex relationship was not merely about a woman's need for sexual gratification but more about her sexual freedom metamorphosing into a different sexual order or queer consciousness, so to say. In that sense, the '*lihaaf*' or the 'quilt' becomes a site for sexual empowerment and at the same time, a physical space for queer utopia for Begum Jaan, for this 'quilt' offers only a temporary and imaginary place of 'ideal' female sexual freedom in a *zenana*. It is a fantasyland, a promised land, her Zion that can only come into being at night when no one cares to notice or pay attention and hence, shall never have a rightful assertion like Nawab Sahib's pursuits owing to her social standing being a woman.

Sexuality as a Powerful Weapon

Sexuality is personal, it comes from a place of knowing oneself and celebrating that. It should not be negotiated with the terms of what one's social roles expect from oneself. When asserted with full confidence and courage, it can be potent enough to shut down the voices that hamper one's desires. It is a means of empowerment and a woman should never feel the need to justify its trajectory to anyone. We have had Indian writers talk about female writers in their stories and then we have writers that have actually lent spirit to their female characters by not letting them feel their naked bodies and naked souls need to adhere to society's false morals.

As seen and analyzed at length in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, where Dopdi uses her

sexuality as a weapon of defiance against her male sexual offenders when she decides to walk past all of these policemen naked after being brutally and horrifically raped at their hands. Similarly, Manto's short story titled *Mozel* which is about a bold and beautiful Jewish woman set in Bombay during communally violent times between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. *Mozel* gives up her robe to protect a Sikh girl from the angry Muslim mob and by consequence of events, falls down naked from a staircase while the mob gets distracted with her beauty. And one someone tries to cover up her naked body with a sheet, she exclaims, "Off with it, your blasted religion." In doing so, she brushes aside her religious leanings gifted to her with her birth and therefore, exerts control over life by virtue of her naked body or naked individuality which is now stripped off of artificial layers of society's stigmas. This reiterates that a woman can exercise her agency using her very sexual and physiological identity as a tool of resistance, defiance and courage. She need not feel subdued or be treated as a subordinate with no actual social power on account of her being a woman fearing she would be exploited due to her sexual identity marked second to a man's, or as Simone de Beauvoir called her "the Other" in the status quo of things, but rather use it to silence the voices of shame, dishonour and false morality.

The Dialectical Tension of 'Dharma'

What is Dharma? What is the essential driving force that the diabolical concept of 'dharma' sustains itself upon? What, or rather whom does it support? And who are its victims, then? Dharma is a Hindu concept which simply means 'the divine law.' By virtue of its concept, we can extend its definition over onto other religions and their respective laws of cosmic or individual existence or the code of conduct for men and women which basically are more or less the same everywhere. But we will concern ourselves only with women here and their dharmic duties, in other words the behaviour expected of them in accordance with their social standing and secondary status.

According to the scriptures, the dharma of a 'wife' differs from let's say, that of a

‘prostitute.’ The ‘dharma’ theoretically places a wife over a prostitute in her status as a woman of more importance and character for obvious reasons that the former’s sexuality is restrained and controlled. But practically speaking the prostitute has more freedom and has lesser chains of false morality attached due to her being distanced from the dharma. The wife and the prostitute are two sides of the same coin of female sexuality. But while, one has more social standing and social acceptance than the other, the other one has more freedom of expression and control over her sexuality. Thus, both lack one of the two basic needs every individual should be given. The wife lacks the freedom even though she tries to remain true to her ‘duties’ as a woman ordained by the dharma, and the prostitute lacks acceptance because she lies outside the peripheries of her dharmic code of conduct as a woman, thereby both are subdued and subjugated in their own respective places. None has complete happiness or even acceptance. While Mrinal is a wife and should have no reason to be unhappy according to her dharma, yet she is compelled to leave her duties behind in order to find true happiness. Her marriage enchains and subdues her existence. In her letter to her husband, she remarks towards the end quoting the Hindu Mythological character of Meera Bai who was a devotee of Lord Krishna that :

No matter if my father leaves, my mother leaves too, let them all go; but Meera will persevere, Lord, whatever may come to pass.

She further remarks with her new found understanding about life after she situates herself away from her so-called ‘dharma’ as a wife and as a woman,

And to persevere, after all, is to be saved.

I too will be saved. I am saved.

Removed from the shelter of your feet,

Mrinal.

Similarly, Umrao Jaan in Mirza Hadi Ruswa’s *Umrao Jaan Ada*, who is a renowned ‘tawayif’ has a comfortably luxurious life, if seen superficially. She has nothing to complain about. She wears

good clothes, eats delicious food, wears exquisite jewelry gifted to her by rich 'nawabs' and yet, she yearns for her childhood innocence. She finds herself sold off into prostitution when only a young girl over a dispute, later raped by one of her inmates and so on. Hence, she could never really have a normal life's happiness.

Both these stereotypical roles designed for women leave no space and scope for their personal happiness. Thus to be completely honest, both these women find themselves at odds with their practical circumstances and the dharma provides no help or escape but just a false and an illusory sense of faith in a conceptual afterlife which 'would be' full of happiness. It does nothing to ease out their present pain, personal dilemmas and disappointments with life. So what good is this social justice that hides behind the veil of 'the divine?'

Concluding Thoughts

To draw this discussion to a close, it is necessary to emphasize again the pseudo and bogus nature of female sexuality constructed by the society. The cult of female sexuality has long been exploited and falsely relegated to aspects that may or may not define it. It should entirely be her own will and decision as to whatever she wants in life. Her sexual identity is not a caged or a dying domestic pet but rather a beautiful bird with its own glorious wings of desire and pleasure. A woman is not a set-in-the-rock image or a role that needs to be adhered to, instead a living, a breathing being with multiple layers of identity to herself, all of which should either be equally celebrated, or at least given the enough amount of space to exist freely and negotiate its own terms of existence.

All the aspects of her sexuality, i-e, the motherhood, the edible nature, the dialectics of the space, the queer expressions of her desire, the various roles or stereotypes thrust upon her identity as those of the mother, the wife, the prostitute, etc. are an intrinsic part of a woman's life and her journey as a sexual being. They may or may not affect her decisions but they certainly do not define her as a woman, nor do they dictate the terms of her sexuality. And while society at times tries to

tame her spirit by chaining her with imposed duties and renders everything essential about her unessential, even uses her sexuality against her(rapes, marital rapes, the fallen women, etc.) to break her and reshape her the way it would be convenient for the society, we still have to realize and acknowledge that she has a life beyond these normativities of rights and wrongs, like all other men and that it should come as natural to her as a man in the eyes of the society, for we live in an environment where social justice holds more power than legal justice. And also, since sexuality is one extent of human ability to live and feel freely, then in stunting and cutting off our sexual feelings we are shrinking the power to feel alive.

Having said that, this paper never intended to sound boisterous at all. It was merely an attempt to state how it felt the nature of facts to be, honestly.

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